Teaching Teachers to Succeed in a Multicultural Climate

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Teacher attitudes and lack of diversity training are major factors in the achievement gaps of minority students.

Achievement gaps by minority students exist across the nation. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that African-American and Latino students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are two years behind other students in the fourth grade. By the 12th grade, the gap has widened and these students lag nearly four years behind (Robelen 2002).

The two most frequently asked questions about the minority achievement gap are Who is to blame? and Why are these students not meeting the standards? Often, our answers tend to blame the victims. “At-risk” and “hard-to-reach” are the stereotypical terms frequently used by educators to describe students from diverse backgrounds who fail to achieve at grade level. These terms can lead to negative connotations and severe misconceptions about children, their families, and their cultures.

But perhaps it is time to redirect the looking glass and examine the role that schools play in the minority achievement gap. While it has been established that inequitable funding, inadequate facilities, and insufficient resources share some of the responsibility, we need to also examine teacher expectations and attitudes.

Research affirms that cultural differences between teachers and students can negatively impact student achievement. Affected students have
shared experiences of having their academic potential consistently underestimated, and contending with a “curriculum and set of expectations… so miserably low-level that they literally bored [them] right out the school door” (Haycock 2001).

Baptism by Fire

A distinct gap has been identified between the preparation and experience of teachers who teach in culturally isolated schools and those who teach in more affluent districts. Just as teachers in diverse settings are more likely to be “unqualified” in their content areas, we are also finding that they have neither been adequately prepared nor provided sufficient professional development to teach effectively. As one such teacher put it: “Only a small fraction of my learning about diverse students was during teacher training. Most of it was ‘learning as you go along’—baptism by fire.” A national report found that only 17 percent of the teachers who taught limited-English proficient or culturally diverse students were totally prepared, 30 percent somewhat prepared, and 33 percent moderately prepared to meet these students’ needs (NCES 1998).

Due to the lack of culturally responsive pedagogy and practice in their preparation programs, teachers have resorted to less effective measures in attempts to meet the needs of their diverse students. Often their efforts consist of minimal, fragmented content, such as discussing holidays, reading multicultural literature, or having international food fairs. One such attempt at multiculturalism in a large urban setting simply meant playing reggae music during free play.

In short, many culturally diverse students are not receiving an optimal educational experience because teachers have not acquired the skills, knowledge, or pedagogy to teach them. Add to that the cultural differences between teachers and students that can have a major impact on student achievement. Research indicates that how teachers relate to students in terms of attitudes and perceptions is one of the critical factors in how students learn (Eubanks 2002). Teacher misconceptions can lead to minority students being misunderstood, miseducated, and possibly mistreated.

Professional Development for Diversity

Professional development for teachers, designed to raise their cultural awareness and better prepare them to differentiate instruction for diverse students, is crucial to student performance and a key element in closing the achievement gap. To be effective, this training should involve more than disseminating information or instructional strategies. It must be systematic and continual.

The Reflection-Instruction-Collaboration-Supportive (RICS) professional development model is an example of the comprehensive approach needed to provide school leaders with a conceptual framework for diversity professional development. It includes the following elements:

Reflection

There is a compelling need (particularly for White educators) to look within ourselves and realign our deepest assumptions and perceptions regarding the racial marker that we carry, namely Whiteness. We need to understand the dynamics of past and present dominance, face how we have been shaped by myths of superiority, and begin to sort out our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors relative to race and other dimensions of human diversity (Howard 1999).

Reflective activities allow for teacher self-awareness and acknowledgment
Diversity in America’s Schools

The number of minority students in our schools is rapidly increasing. The U.S. Department of Commerce has reported that more than one-third of today’s public school students are people of color (NEA 2002), and it has been projected that by the year 2025 that number will increase to 49 percent (Smolkin 2000).

Simultaneously, the number of minority teachers is decreasing. In 1974, 12.5 percent of full-time public school teachers were black (Froning 1976), compared to only 9.2 percent in the 1990–1991 school year (Snyder & Hoffmann 1994). Currently, approximately 13 percent of teachers are of minority descent (black, Hispanic, and Asian/Pacific Islanders), and more than 40 percent of the schools across America have no minority teachers (NEA 2002).

Instruction

Culturally responsive pedagogy can “establish an intimate connection between knowledge considered basic to any school curriculum and knowledge that is the fruit of the lived experience of these students as individuals” (Friere 1998).

Direct instruction can raise teachers’ consciousness, knowledge, and understanding about the dynamics of the school community. Teachers should learn specific instructional strategies that will enhance the achievement of culturally diverse students. For example, Ladson-Billings identified the following characteristics of effective teachers of African-American students:

- They are concerned individuals who command respect, respect pupils, and are strict, although caring, in requiring all students to meet high academic and behavioral standards.
- They are concerned not only with the students’ cognitive development, but also with their affective, social, and emotional development.
- They use a culturally relevant approach to literacy teaching (Ladson-Billings 1995).

Collaboration

The purpose of staff development is not just to implement instructional innovations; its central purpose is to build strong collaborative work cultures that will develop the long-term capacity for change (Fullan 2002).

True collaboration enhances the school climate by creating dialogues between principals, teachers, parents, and students. Two-way communication is the key. Teachers must actively listen to each other, demonstrate mutual respect, and establish rapport. Participants must also understand that...
all partners share responsibility to improve cultural responsiveness.

Supportive

An isolated teacher can’t be successful. Teacher collaboration and teacher training are critical (Swerdlick 2002).

A support system increases teachers’ self-efficacy and encourages them to initiate and implement effective strategies. Team-building can alleviate the feeling of “going it alone.” It is essential for principals to establish a support system, such as a mentoring program, during the learning process.

Providing specialized professional development for diversity is a promising approach to closing the achievement gaps of diverse students. Principals should perceive the need for change and provide the necessary guidance and support. By providing a positive role model for their teachers, they can establish a climate that embraces diversity and encourages teachers to be more receptive to new ideas and instructional approaches to meet the needs of their culturally diverse students.

References


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WEB RESOURCES

Education Week’s Research Center provides an in-depth exploration of school achievement gaps and related articles. Free registration is required.
www.edweek.org

The National Study Group for the Affirmative Development of Academic Ability offers “All Students Reaching the Top,” a report on strategies for closing academic achievement gaps.
www.ncrel.org/gap/studies/allstudents.pdf

UNICEF has a report about school achievement gaps in other nations.
www.unicef-icdc.org/publications/pdf/repcard4e.pdf